

CALIFORNIA NEWS

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Ideas for revitalizing delta to be aired

■ **Options:** Group has 3 plans to fix ecology and provide water to state, if residents will pay.

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SACRAMENTO — In an event closely watched by urban, environmental and farm interests, government officials Monday plan to release stacks of new details explaining three multibillion-dollar options to restore the state's fragile bay-delta system.

The choices represent an ambitious balancing act by seven federal and state agencies. Their goal: to repair the battered ecology of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta — the state's largest source of fresh water — while still providing drinking water for 22 million Californians and irrigation water for much of the state's \$24 billion agriculture industry.

"This is the first public opportunity to help us evaluate the options to fix the delta," said California Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler. "We cannot resolve California's water problems going into the 21st century until we fix the delta."

The agencies have been working together in a group known as CALFED since 1994, when Gov. Pete Wilson and the Clinton administration signed the historic Bay-Delta Accord. It was an attempt at compromise after 30 years of lawsuits and political brawls surrounding the delta, its environment and water use.

In September 1996, CALFED officials released general outlines of the three plans. They range from relatively simple improve-

ments, such as buying farmland to create new wetlands and changing water pumping schedules, to a controversial plan to build a so-called "Peripheral Canal" that would take water around the eastern edge of the delta en route to Southern California. That plan was rejected by voters in 1982.

Now come the specifics to see which choice, if any, will work.

The estimated price tag for the options ranges from \$4 billion to \$8 billion, with work completed over 25 years. Such a project, if it can negotiate the political shoals, would rank as the largest ecosystem restoration effort in the United States, more expensive and far-reaching than ongoing work to improve the Florida Everglades.

For the past two years, biologists, engineers and other scientists have studied the options, originally selected from a list of 20.

Their end product, to be unveiled at 10 a.m. Monday at the Sacramento Convention Center, is the mother of all environmental impact reports. There are 5,000 pages that examine 120 species of wildlife as well as water use by farmers, cities and fish; engineering options to strengthen levees and build new reservoirs; wetlands restoration; pesticides; rainfall; and a host of other topics. Also included will be plans spelling out how taxpayers might pay for it all.

After a series of 12 public hearings in April and May, CALFED's board will choose a preferred plan by July, said Steve Yaeger, the agency's deputy director. Then the agency will spend the rest of the year completing further studies and building support for new bond acts, higher water rates, federal grants and other ways to pay for the plan.

"We don't believe that we'll be able to move forward with the preferred alternative unless we can achieve broad support from all the interest groups around a single alternative," Yaeger said.

Since 1994, CALFED scientists have spent \$28 million studying the delta. Why? It's a big issue, with huge effects on California's \$1 trillion economy.

At 738,000 acres, the delta is nearly the size of Yosemite National Park. A network of sloughs, islands, marshes and reclaimed farmland stretching from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay, it sits at the confluence of California's two largest rivers, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin.

Once thick with millions of migrating birds and teeming with salmon, the delta began to decline in the late 1800s when farmers diked, drained and filled its wetlands.

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